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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF NATIONAL NAMES AUTHORITIES

The Norwegian Place-name Act

Paper submitted by Norway**

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1. The Legislation

The Norwegian Place-name Act was passed by the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) on 22 February 1990 and sanctioned on 18 May 1990. The Act came into effect on 1 July 1991. Further regulations will be given by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The fact that this Act applies exclusively to the standardization and use of place-names makes it unique in the international context.

2. Background

The place-name regulations which were in force previously did not have the status of law, but legislation was needed to give legal weight to decisions concerning the standardization of place-names. The legal right to determine the written form of the name of the property was previous in the hands of the farm owner. In many cases the form chosen by the individual did not comply with the form recommended by the authorities on the basis of the linguistic and cultural history of the place-name.

In the 1960s a number of property owners brought court cases against the State in order to have the official written form of place-names changed. The State lost these cases due to insufficient legislation. Later a research programme was conducted with a view to producing adequate and unambiguous regulations which would on the one hand give the State the necessary legal power to determine written forms and on the other hand take into account the interests of the individual. An official Place-name Committee was appointed in 1979 and presented its recommendations in the NOU 1983:6: Stadnamn (the series of Norwegian Official Reports No. 6, 1983, Place-Names). From 1983-89 the Ministry of Cultural Affairs prepared a parliamentary bill which went through the Norwegian Parliament during the 1989-90 session and was passed in the spring of 1990.

The opposition between the two forms of the Norwegian language has been a contributory factor in many place-name disputes. More than 400 years of Danish rule ensured that Danish was the dominant written language in Norway until the mid-nineteenth century. All place-names were also written in Danish and in many cases the Danish form was based on a misunderstanding of the original name. The process of re-establishing Norwegian forms was made possible by, among other things, the formulation of "Nynorsk", the written form of Norwegian based on the Norwegian dialects. Controversies about place-names have often been between supporters of the two forms of the language with those on the one side wanting to maintain the established Danish form and those on the other side favouring the "Nynorsk" written form based on the dialect pronunciation. The latter was preferred by the authorities who composed the standardization regulations for place-names at the beginning of this century. However, the Danish written forms were to a great extent kept in cases where the farm names were used as family names. Many property owners prefer to have the name of the property written in the same way as their family name, without regard for the local pronunciation or spelling rules.

3. The Main Elements of the Act

3.1. Area of Jurisdiction

The Place-name Act applies on the Norwegian main land. It does not apply on Svalbard, Jan Mayen, the Norwegian Dependencies, the Norwegian continental shelf or the Norwegian economic zone. The Norwegian Polar Research Institute has issued special regulations which apply in these areas.

3.2. Uniform Standardization in Official Contexts

Place-names which have been authorized in accordance with the Place-Name Act are to be used by all official bodies. If a place-name has two or more written forms in use in the same language one of the forms is to take precedence. Where a locality has a Sami name and/or a Finnish name in addition to a Norwegian name both/all names should, as a rule, be used. On signs or maps where two or more names are used, they should appear in the order Norwegian, Sami, Finnish, except in areas where Sami is the administrative language, in which case the Sami name should appear first.

3.3. Standardization is to be based on local pronunciation and current spelling rules

The standardization of a place-name is to be based on traditional pronunciation and must comply with current rules for the spelling of one of the two forms of Norwegian, "Bokmål" or "Nynorsk". For the Sami language the current spelling rules for "Nordsamisk", "Lulesamisk" and "Sørsamisk" apply. For Finnish place-names in Norway the Finnish spelling rules apply, but with regional modifications. These principles also apply to the inherited (traditional) names of farms and other properties. Newly created place-names, literary names and foreign names need not be standardized according to these principles.

3.4. The Authorization Process

The official body which uses the place-name in question is to authorize its written form. This is done by the Norwegian Mapping Authority, the Postal Services, the Public Roads Administration and other state departments, and by county or local councils. The majority of place-names are authorized by the eighteen county offices of the Mapping Authority. The names for properties and other private concerns are established by the owners within the limits stated above. Local town and county councils authorize the names of roads, streets and council properties.

Public bodies, property owners, local organizations and place-name advisors are all by law entitled to initiate the evaluation of the written form of a name. This process may be required in connection with the issue of new or revised maps, or with the naming of roads and other features.

Before the written form of a name is authorized all parties concerned must be consulted. The local usage of the name and the wishes of the local population must be noted. The local hearing is the responsibility of the local council. After having considered the statements from the local hearing and the relevant linguistic material the place-name advisors make recommendations to the authorizing body. The official authorization of the name must be accompanied by a statement giving the reasons for the choice of standardized form. This statement is particularly important in the case of controversial names. The local council and, if relevant, the property owner must be be officially informed of the authorization of the place-name.

3.5. Place-Name Advisors

The Place-name Act has entailed an extension of the advisory service and the division of the field of responsibility into regions. There are now two place-name advisors at each of the four universities in Norway; in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø, dealing with the standardization in the corresponding regions. In addition there are two or more positions for advisors for Sami and Finnish place-names. At each of the universities, there is a position for an assistant advisor whose function is to prepare cases for the advisors. The advisors and the assistants must have university qualifications in Nordic languages. The place-name advisors, who are engaged for a period of six years, are responsible for making sure that place-names are written in accordance with the law. The advisory service is financed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

3.6. The Place-name Register

A central computerized register of all Norwegian place-names in official use is being compiled under the direction of the Norwegian Mapping Authority. The Register is based on the Norwegian Map Series N50 (earlier M711) on the scale of 1:50,000. Names on other official maps will gradually be added to the register. New place-names which come into use and changes in the existing standardized forms are to be notified to the Place-Name Register. Names which have been standardized by law will be marked with a special code. The register also contains information on map sheets, designation/type of locality, language, authorizing body, if the name is authorizied/proposed/rejected/not evaluated, date of consideration, source, and other comments. The register is available to anyone who may be interested in the information it contains. The Mapping Authority has now employed a specialist in name research to deal with the linguistic aspects of the register.

3.7. Appeals Committee

An Appeals Committee has been established to deal with complaints about the standardized forms of place-names. The chairman of the Committee must be a High Court judge. Official bodies which use place-names, local organizations, and property owners have the right of appeal. Place-name advisors, on the other hand, do not have the right of appeal.